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ABSTRACT

In recent years the High Romantic concept of the solitary author has been intensely challenged. Compositionists and various theorists have deconstructed the concept of isolated authorship and critiqued the Romantic notion of individual genius. Meanwhile, the reconstruction of the female literary tradition introduced the question of gender and uncovered an alternative model for the writer based on a sense of the collaborative nature of writing. The recent critical turn in Romantic studies began with Jerome McGann's characterization of Romantic assertions of "eternal truth" as historically relative ideology. In contrast to the more masculine view of authorship, the women of the Romantic period present a vastly different image of the writer and the writing process, an image composed of three important paradigms: the Bluestockings, or a salon of writers; the family circle of writers; and the improvisatrice, which was also figured as Corinne or Sappho. For whatever reasons, the masculine premises of the solitary writer have become embedded in composition pedagogy. In contrast, the female paradigm of the Sappho fiction offers alternative premises and values. It represents a community, is squarely audience-centered, entails improvisation, and places greater weight on process than product. The way that writing instructors fictionalize authorship bears vast pedagogical implications, and because gender ideology structures the way teachers think about composing, they must consider the impact of a given pedagogy on both male and female students. (Thirty references are attached.) (HB)

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Fictions of the Writer: A Critical Articulation of Collaborative Writing and Literary Studies

In recent years the High Romantic concept of the solitary author has been intensely challenged. Collaborative writing theorists have attacked the idea of individualistic authorship; social constructionists have decried the notion of a writer cut off from societal vectors; theorists have announced a crisis of subjectivity. For many writers, the archetype of the singular author can be traced directly back to the Romantic writer and even more specifically to the Romantic notion of the individual genius. Even as compositionists and, more broadly, discourse theorists, deconstruct the concept of isolated authorship, Romanticists have also been engaged in a critique of facets of the Romantic ideology, specifically the idea of individual genius. These two approaches complement and catalyze each other in interesting ways; a third project, the reconstruction of the female literary tradition, enriches our examination even more by introducing the question of gender and uncovering an alternative model for the writer, a model based on a sense of the collaborative nature of writing and found largely in the ignored texts of Romantic women writers.

It is best to begin at one of my starting points for this paper: Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford's Singular Texts/Plural Authors. In one section of their 1990 volume, Ede and Lunsford review the development of the idea of intellectual ownership.

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Edward Young's "assertions of originality," Ede and Lunsford write,

> all the more striking because of their contrast with the increased alienation and loss of independence catalyzed by the Industrial Revolution, helped further establish this new view of the writer as author. ...Wordsworth's and others' descriptions of the author's responsibility and achievement guaranteed a privileged place for both authors and their creations....
>
> (85)

Nor are Ede and Lunsford alone in linking the concept of the solitary writer with Romantic mythography. Kenneth Bruffee finds the singular "authority of knowledge" lodged in the figure of Wordsworth, among others. Ann Ruggles Gere asserts that Wordsworth and Co. departed from a audience-based rhetoric and "spoke directly about the centrality of the writer's perceptions.... This aesthetic concept of originality as genius interacted with the legal-economic concept of ownership... to produce the modern concept of authorship (60-61)."

Almost simultanously with the development of collaborative theory, Romantic literary scholars have embarked on a parallel project. Paul Cantor (708-09), Clifford Siskin (6; 56-62), Jon Klancher (77-78) and others suggest that the recent critical turn in Romantic studies began with Jerome McGann's 1983 book, The Romantic Ideology. McGann asserts that the "truths" and qualities

of traditional Romanticism are historically relative and are simply cultural ideology. When reading Romantic writers, McGann asserts, we need to remember that

> their ideas--for example, ideas about the creativity of Imagination, about the centrality of the Self, about the organic and processive structure of natural and social life, and so forth--are all historically specific in a crucial and paradoxical sense. ...In the Romantic Age these and similar ideas are represented as trans-historical--eternal truths which wake to perish never.
>
> (134)

As this passage suggests, one of the major themes critiqued by this new historicist/cultural studies project is the valorization of the unified Self. That is one of the main assertions in Marlon Ross's 1989 book, The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women's Poetry, in Stuart Curran's article "Romantic Poetry: The I Altered," in a article, "Romantic Prose and Feminine Romanticism," by Susan Levin, and in 1989 books by Christine Battersby and Meena Alexander. What many of these writers observe is that the fiction of the poetic Self--the writer-who-writes-alone, as Linda Brodkey tags it--is embedded in gender ideology: it is specifically male, figured out in martyred male artists, promulgated by male writers.

When we turn to women writers from the same period, we discover a vastly different image of the writer and consequently

of the writing process. There are three important paradigms: the Bluestockings, and more generally the idea of a salon of writers; the family circle of writers; and the improvisatrice, which was also figured as Corinne or Sappho.

The Bluestockings were originally an informal group of men and women who gathered to discuss literature, philosophy, politics, and other intellectual topics, roughly between the early 1760s and 1790. These women conceived of themselves as belonging to a community of women within which all stages of the writing process--invention, drafting, and revising--could be and was undertaken collectively. While writing was encouraged, conversation was the currency of the bluestockings.

Hannah More's poem "The Bas-Bleu," since it so clearly captures the spirit of the Blues and, in broad terms, the process of what we might call their macro-writing, bears a brief examination. Besides being a mock-heroic record of the circle and a satire on the banality of modern fashions, the poem ends with More's assertion that conversation is essential to thinking and intellectual production. Not only does conversation catalyze thinking, the response of the audience alters and reinforces the direction of the writer's meditations. More celebrates "the pure delight / When kindling sympathies unite; / When correspondent tastes impart / Communion sweet from heart to heart" (Works 302-03).

The point here is that the aesthetics and the philosophy of thinking and writing which the Bluestocking circle developed was,

in important ways, collectivist and audience-centered. Discourse also was not logocentric, since it followed the ebb and flow of conversation.

Besides the conservative Bluestocking circle, Radical writers in the 1790s also generated their own "writing group," centering around the publisher Joseph Johnson. Two writers in this coterie were the feminists Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays. Hays (1760-1843) became a protege of Wollstonecraft's after the latter published the Vindication; and in the early 1790s the two women frequently met, discussed their texts, revised each other's work, and (fortunately for us) corresponded. While Hays's letters are not available, we do have Wollstonecraft's. The revisions she suggests are a clear-headed articulation of ideology and style. A letter in 1792 indicates even more clearly Wollstonecraft's participation in the writing process and her awareness of how style bears ideology:

> I have just cast my eye over your sensible little pamphlet [Cursory Remarks, published 1792], and found fewer of the superlatives, exquisite, fascinating, &c, all of the feminine gender, than I expected. Some of the sentiments, it is true, are rather obscurely expressed; but if you continue to write you will imperceptibly correct this fault and learn to think with more clearness, and consequently avoid the errours naturally produced by confusion of thought.
>
> (223)

The Bluestocking circle effectively ended with the French Revolution, and the Radical group dispersed by the end of the eighteenth century; these were replaced, after 1800, with the family circle. Women's writing took place in the dining or drawing rooms, with constant interruptions, oral readings, comment. Sometimes several families would gather for reading, discussion, and writing, as was the case of the Taylor family of Essex. As Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall point out in their remarkable book Family Fortunes, "Discussion groups, based on reading, were a common feature of middle-class life; both discussion and reading frequently took place within the family circle. ...[Most men and women] wrote for their own pleasure and edification and that of their relatives and friends" (162).

The myth of Sappho offers a third paradigm for the woman writer. Joan DeJean's 1989 study, Fictions of Sappho, 1546-1937, demonstrates that Sappho was known as "the female counterpart, and presumably the equal, of 'the poet,' Homer" (1). Sappho--and Madame de Stael's fictionalization of the poet, Corinne--were frequently celebrated by Romantic women poets, and indeed they adopted this fiction of the writer as their own, becoming, in a sense, Corinne themselves, just as the High Romantics became their own model of solitary genius--Socrates or Homer/Chatterton. As early as 1796 Mary Robinson published her sonnet sequence Sappho and Phaon. Constance Grace Garnett published a play entitled Sappho: A Dramatic Sketch in 1824. L.E.L. (Letitia Elizabeth Landon) and Felicia Hemans both penned several versions

of the Sappho myth. All these texts inscribe the fiction of Sappho's unrequited heterosexual love and her suicide, but they also inscribe the impromptu, collaborative, conversational, and audience-centered vision of composing that we have been tracing through women's writings. Some of the rhetorical qualities of Sapphic creativity are: an emphasis on spontaneity, and not on the revision process; a theory firmly rooted in invention; an aesthetics which is obviously expressive but is also clearly audience-centered; a sense of the poet speaking for her audience, becoming almost a collective speaker, like a Greek chorus; an emphasis on the emotional and sympathetic dimension of discourse; and a belief in the importance of conversation and dialogue in the creative process.

The male paradigm, the Homer/Wordsworth/Chatterton model, was privileged for a number of reasons, such as the triumph of capitalist individualism, the success of the self-representations of the Romantic writers, the choices and criteria of later generations of literary critics, the hegemony of Channing's pedagogy at Harvard, the gender bias of the critical industry and academe. Whatever the reasons, the premises of the solitary writer have become embedded in composition pedagogy. We can easily recite some of those assumptions: the valorization of sincerity and expressiveness generally; concomitantly, the privileging of a single, "objective", omniscient authorial stance; an emphasis on the text and its content, not on audience; an obsession with authorial possession and burglary (plagiarism);

a compulsion towards "clear" referential language; and a preoccupation with dispositio and revisio.

In contrast the female paradigm of the Sappho/Corinne fiction offers alternative premises and values. While expressiveness is important to this rhetoric, it is not sincerity or the representation of a singular self that is expressed. Instead it is the sentiments and thoughts of a small community that the writer represents and re-presents. And as a corollary, while the speaker is often first-person, that speaker never loses sight of the community in which she writes: this rhetoric remains squarely audience-centered. Because this fiction of the writer entails improvisation and impromptu discourse (a kind of free writing), the emphasis falls on inventio rather than on other features of the rhetorical act. And the improvisational and oral dimension of creation in this version of authorship places greater weight on the process, not the product, of discourse.

Much of what I have said echoes Elizabeth Flynn's important 1988 CCC article, "Composing as a Woman:" Flynn sees female narration founded on connection, male narration on individuation. While Flynn draws her conclusions from the psychological work of Chodorow, Gilligan, Belenky, et.al. and analyses of student writing, I have come to similar conclusions from women's writings during the Romantic period. As Flynn suggests, the importance of all this lies in what we do with our students, whether we immasculate them or empower them. The way we fictionalize authorship bears vast pedagogical implications. The dialectic

I've been exploring suggests that gender ideology structures the way we think about composing, and that we need to consider the impact of our pedagogy on male and female students.

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